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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature concerning ethnographic studies of writing reveals a number of reasons for the writing that people do. Some studies of writing in the schools found that what is considered "writing" is not really writing at all and that the majority of students consider the teacher to be their sole audience. Other studies examining writing within a cultural context--both within and outside the United States--to determine why people write discovered that writing serves a variety of purposes and audiences. A study conducted in Marion, Ohio, collected and organized preliminary information needed to design and carry out an ethnography of writing in a culturally diverse midwestern community. Participants were observed in community settings where writing naturally occurred and data from 91 instances of writing behavior were analyzed. Results of this descriptive study and of the literature review suggest instructional practices that can be adapted to all levels of students, including having students write for "authentic" reasons, for a variety of audiences, and within a wide range of activities and assignments. Ethnographic studies of writing are thus valuable for providing teachers with insights into the nature and function of writing and with ideas for creating writing curricula that offer students realistic opportunities for writing. (DF)

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Why People Write: Ethnographies of Writing and Implications for Instruction

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WHY PEOPLE WRITE: ETHNOGRAPHIES OF WRITING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

Abstract

This paper is based on research, conducted by the authors and funded by the Spencer Foundation Awards to Young Scholars Program, which was entitiled "Toward and Ethnography of Writing in Marion, Ohio." The authors conducted a comprehensive review of literature related to ethnographic studies of writing and then completed a preliminary descriptive study of writing in the Mrion, Ohio community. In this paper, the authors establish a rationale for incorporating information about why people write in planning for writing instruction. An overview of ethnographic studies revealing why people write in diverse cultural settings is presented as is a summary of the Marion, Ohio writing study. Implications for writing instruction are drawn from these sources.

Why do people write? Those of us who are interested in this question could no doubt generate a lenghty list of responses that would range from the profound to the mundane. On our best days we might say that we write in an attempt to communicate great ideas to future generations. On more average days we may reveal that we write in order to remember why we went to the grocery store in the first place. Our answers to the question why do people, children in particular, write in school are likely to reflect a more restricted range of responses. This is not surprising because writing is school is most often undertaken at the direction of someone else, the teacher, and children may find that they write because they are told to do so or in order to "get a good grade" or even to be kept busy and out of trouble.

There is evidence that some schools are incorporating a broader range of reasons for writing in instructional programs and that information about the role of writing in the community is being used in creative and productive ways. The work of Sondra Perl (1983) in concert with the Shoreham-Wading River school district, for example, is examining the wider context of the writing process and perceptions of students and teachers toward writing events. As a participant in the study, Pekala (1983) reports that her first graders begin each

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morning with writing. Her rationale demonstrates the importance of linking the functions of writing in and out of school. She states:

> ... at the beginning of the day, writing becomes the bridge between the students' lives outside school and the activities they engage in at school. Writing is a smooth way for students to make the transition between their two worlds. (p.26)

In contrast to the preceding example much of what has been , and in many instances still is, considered 'writing' in school is not actually writing at all; rather, it consists of a-rhetcrical exercises such as identifying the parts of speech, diagraming sentences, and filling out worksheets. Such exercises are easily measurable; that is, they are a matter of right or wrong. Not surprisingly, then, a preponderance of teachers spend class time addressing these areas and testing students on them, much to the neglect,if not the exclusion, of providing students with actual writing experiences. Thus both Applebee's (1981) and Graves' (1978) reports that writing is seldom practiced in the schools pinpoint a real failing in the American educational system, as well as an area worthy of continued research.

Scribner and Cole (1977) stated that too much time in school was spent on the "academic" model of writing without regard to students' future writing activities. James Britton (1978) reported on his findings which support the Scribner and Cole claim. Instead of focusing on the types of writing in which students were engaged, Britton looked at the audience for whom children write. Of 2000 scripts written by 500 secondary school students, 88% were written from "pupil to teacher' or "pupil to examiner" (39% former, 49% latter), according to Britton. Thus students overwhelmingly viewed the teacher or examiner as their sole audience, and rarely did they perceive of their peers, family, or even themselves as a suitable, let alone viable, audience.

In the years that have passed since Scribner's and Britton's reports, seemingly little has changed in terms of the types of writing activities in which one finds students engaged at school. Dyson (1982) reports that while a number of kindergarten students she studied engaged in creative and innovative explorations into producing printed language at home, their progress was halted when at school handwriting and encoding practice in workbooks took the place of real composing activities. Bader and Pearce (1983) state that writing at the junior high school

level is predominantly related to reviewing course material, recopying, and testing student knowledge. Furthermore, such writing is assigned as a way to monitor the noise level in the classroom. At the junior high school level, according to Bader and Pearce, writing centers around non-original assignments; in high school, the majority of writing in content area classes consists of answering test and chapter review questions, whereas in English and social studies classes, the predominant mode of writing takes the form of research papers. As such, what many students learn under the guise of "writing" are the "procedures for learning," and not the needed literary skills (Bloome, 1981). Further, what they do learn about writing is, at best, limited in terms of the types of writing in which they can become involved, the different types of audiences for whom they can write, and the different functions writing holds for them and for their readers.

Because ethnographic research assumes that writing cannot be divorced from its social context, all writing--in school and non-school contexts-- finds a place in writing research. It provides pertinent, valuable and highly researchable sources of material with which to examine writing as well as ways to inform the teaching of writing. The ways in which writing is actually practiced and learned provide insights into how it can best be taught to students. Whiteman (1980) maintains that studying the real world uses of writing outside of the classroom holds special importance because it helps dispel the myth that writing is unimportant in a technological age, and promotes an understanding of the diversity of writing. Ultimately, such inquiry can help teachers tailor writing instruction to fit the current motivations and future needs of students. Thus, again we ask ourselves, why do people write ; however , we now turn beyond our own responses and toward ethnographic studies of writing for our answers.

> Shirley Brice Heath (1981) has noted that:
> ...knowing how writing is used in the communities and work settings of different cultures can help teachers and school administrators make writing fit the social contexts in which it will be used by those individuals who choose to live out their adult lives in their 'home culture'. (p.39)

Heath (1983) studied the cultural context for writing by investigating how writing was used in rural areas of the Piedmont Carolinas. She also compared the reasons why people wrote in a white and black working class community. She found that writing skills were not necessary in order to obtain good jobs in the textile mills where salaries were higher than those of public

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school teachers. Similarly, in rural communities, little emphasis was placed on writing. In the black mill community, writing was primarily used by women as memory aids, as in writing telephone numbers and notes on calendars and as substitutes for oral messages. People also wrote for financial reasons such as check signing and for church records such as the church bulletin. Similar reasons for writing exist in the white mill community to include memory aids, subtitutes for or reafffirmation of oral messages, financial and social interactions and the like. In discussing the role of writing in people's lives, Heath (1983) pointed out:

> Writing is private, done only when necessary,
> and as such, it occupies only part of daily life...
> Writing is not a high priority among the "shoulds" of
> community members, and there is little interest in
> extending their writing habits or improving their
> children's except insofar as writing relates to
> specific school tasks. (p.219)

As part of her ethnographic study, Heath (1983) worked with local schools to modify writing instruction. For example, in high school classes of basic level students, journal writing was introduced as a way to illustrate how people can use written discourse as a private means to better understand themselves . Second graders became linguistic "detectives," collecting information about the functions and uses of reading and writing in their daily lives and community. Heath (1983) describes:

> The children had learned to observe, record, categorize, and analyze ways
> in which people spoke and ways in which they used their language for writing
> and reading. Gathering information from familiar community members, they
> had contextualized reading and writing in their community life and in their own
> daily existence at home and in school...the second graders now defined themsleves
> as readers and writers. (p.333)

In an ethnographic study of a Chinese family from Viet Nam now living in an urban center, Schieffelin (1982) found a "literary role reversal". The nine-year old son in the family assisted his parents with spoken and written English activities. Written activities in the home were dominated by letter writing and the completion of forms.

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Weinstein (1982) investigated literacy among Laotian refugees in Philadelphia. She found that writing served three functions. First, it was a tool for negotiating with new institutions such as in the signing of forms. Second, those Laotians who possessed literacy skills were called upon to compose documents and letters for others, a function Weinstein labelled as "a tool used by those who mediate beween culture groups". Third, the Laotians began to substitute oral with written communication regarding the organization of meetings, the arranging of transportation or as a tool which articulated a new social status.

While the preceding studies investigated writing among various cultures living within the United States, the functions of writing among the Vai of Liberia were investigated by Scribner and Cole (1978). The Vai have invented a syllabic writing system to represent their language which they use most commonly for letter writing. Other functions of the Vai script include record-keeping, labels or marking devices, and lists of various kinds. It is important to point out that for the Vai the acquisition of literacy and schooling are separate and distinct. Scribner and Cole's finding that literacy exists even without formal education certainly raises questions about commonly held assumptions regarding the role of the schools and the instruction of reading and writing. They conclude that:

> It seems premature to conclude that only schools and teachers are concerned with writing and that writing would perish in this era of television if not artificially kept alive in academic settings. (p.85)

An ethnographic monitoring of reading and writing was conducted by Hymes (1981) and others in predominantly black elementary schools in inner city Philadelphia. By investigating the "unofficial" writing of children, the researchers uncovered the variety of expressive and social functions of writing in the lives of the children. For example, the passing of notes was a vehicle to express messages of affection and social relationships to peers as well as to the teacher. Children were also found to make lists of many kinds and to engage in the fancy printing of alphabet letters. In addition, some writing, such as "I am the best" was considered status writing and served as ego reinforcement for the child.

Florio and Clark (1982) also studied the functions of writing in an elementary classroom. They discovered four reasons for writing in the classroom: writing to participate in community

(classroom rule-setting); writing to know oneself and others (diaries); writing to occupy free time (letters and cards); and writing to demonstrate academic competence (science lab books). This wide range of writing activities suggests that the audience for writing may be wide: writing to other students, to the teacher, to others (family, friends), and to oneself. Moreover, the "fate" of writing need not rest in the hands of teacher-as-evaluator: rather, student writing may be posted for others to see, locked in one's desk, kept as a momento or record of one's activities and/or thoughts, given as gifts to parents or friends, and even sent to others such as to editors or publishers to be printed in commercial booklets; or to public officials or corporate heads, such as letters of praise or complaint.

Florio and Clark's (1982) conclusions, like those of the Hymes (1981) study concerning the "unofficial" or, if you will, "underground" writing of children are not surprising. The real, not exclusively academic, reasons for writing in school reflect a broad range of social and personal functions. What is surprising, at least to the authors, is that a remarkably similar range of writing functions was revesled in the course of our study of writing in the community of Marion, Ohio.

The purpose of the study entitled "Toward an Ethnography of Writing in Marion, Ohio" was to collect and organize preliminary information and data necessary to design and conduct an ethnography of writing in a culturally diverse midwestern community. Preliminary data regarding the functions and uses of writing were sought from a variety of sources. We were interested in beginning to understand who writes, why they write, where they write, and what is written in this community. To this end the researchers conducted participant observations in community settings where writing naturally occurred. Some of these settings included a school office, kindergarten registration meetings, restaurants, a travel agency, health club, local radio station, and community action agency. Interviews were conducted with community members and school personnel. A self-report form was also completed by more than fifty individuals who live and work in the community. Samples of writing actually produced were collected when possible. In total 91 instances of writing behavior were documented. The data was analyzed in a descriptive manner in order to avoid a priori categories from being imposed. A form of constituent analysis was used to establish and verify substantive categories concerning: who

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wrote, why they wrote, where writing occurred and what was actually written.

Analysis of the writing data revealed that the reasons people wrote could be arrayed on three continua. The first of these reflected writing that ranged from the private ("I wrote for myself in order to capture the feelings I was having") to the public, as in writing notices for the church bulletin. The second presented reasons for writing that ranged from ones that were self directed to those that were directed by authorities or superiors, and the third ranged from writing that involved communication between people who were personally involved to relatively impersonal communicative events. The researchers observed, and participants reported, more positive feelings about the writing process and written products when the writing behavior occurred toward the private, self-motivated or interpersonal communication ends of the continua. Feelings of personal satisfaction and joy were noted in relation to writing that occurred for personal and self-motivatied reasons. Pressure, anxiety, guilt and even panic were reported when writing was to be public and/or was directed by authorities or superiors. We must wonder whether these anxious feelings found their origin in school writing assignments and their evaluations. An exception to a general preference for personally motivated writing was noted when writing focused on financial tasks. It did not seem to matter whether one decided to or was told to send out checks, write up a budget, or complain about a bill. These reasons for writing did not seem to be intrinsically rewarding for those in our study.

The categories of reasons revealed for writing across each of the continua were grouped as follows: people wrote to capture feelings, to make life easier, to fulfill obligations, to communicate with others outside of the immediate environment, and to gain access to goods and services. Within the "writing to make life easier" category participants reported that they wrote to organize their thoughts, remember ideas, and to communicate with immediate family members who were not available at the moment. Budgets, lists and lesson plans were also cited as making life easier. Writing to fulfill obligations included response notes, task-delegating memos and long-overdue letters. Participants reported that feelings of guilt were occasionally associated with these tasks. Communication with others outside of the immediate environment involved, as one would expect, letters to parents, extended family and friends as well as letters to an insurance company, doctor, and hotel. Writing used to gain access to services, institutions, jobs, and funds tended to be formal communicative events. In several of these situations which involved writing to gain access, participants filled out forms which were then used by another

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person to organize and direct an oral interview . Thus what had been written served to focus face to face communication. This was especially evident in observations conducted at the community action agency.

Where and when people wrote provided us with some surprising information. People were often observed to be writing in environments not primarily associated with writing behavior. For example on several occasions people who were dining alone in restaurants were observed to be writing while waiting for and during their meals. These writing instances included such tasks as simple list writing on the backs of napkins and intense concentration on writing reports and notes for making presentations. In another situation one participant reported writing in church, during the sermon, on the back of the church bulletin. She commented that she hoped she would not be noticed as she planned the menu for an upcoming formal dinner at her home. As we observed people writing while talking on the telephone, in libraries, health spas, doctors' offices, restaurants and radio stations, it became apparent that writing is pervasive, though often in the background, in many public places in the community. Our observations and respondents' reports also revealed writing occurring at all hours of the day and night. Professional women and married students especially noted that they wrote late at night. Comments such as, "I began writing when the house was quiet, when the kids were all asleep and I had no distractions," were not unusual. Thus although we observed much writing in public, privacy is for some writers, and certain writing tasks, a supportive environmental feature.

Our data yielded other interesting and useful information about why people write. Apparently people write to provide some degree of extended life to their thoughts and communicative events. Of this study's 91 documented instances of writing, 82 situations presented writing that was kept if not given or sent to a specific person or group. Only in 8 situations was the writing trashed without some overt use beyond that served by the act of writing itself. For example a rough draft of a letter to an insurance company lasted only until a typed version was prepared, lists of household chore responsibilities were used for a week, monthly budgets were prepared, and a thank you note may or may not have been kept long enough to share it with several members of the receiving household.

Similarly and perhaps especially important for teachers to note, although all writing situations were viewed by observers and participants as discrete writing events, more than one

third (31) of the writing situations reflected steps in a writing process. That is people expected to change, update,or polish what they wrote. Their writing remained current and available for them to do something with it. Examples of such writing included notes on planning selections for an organ recital, a draft of a classified ad to be called into the advertising section of the local paper, lost dog reports to be announced on the radio, interview notes, a resume, and a letter written nightly by a participant and her spouse. He worked days and she worked nights. The participant who reported the ongoing nightly letter stressed that it was indeed a letter and not a series of notes. She revealed that it comforted her to write her portion of the letter during the day, that she incubated or rehearsed portions of it when she was at work, and that the letter evolved each week to reflect the stresses and pleasures of their circumstances. Her motivation to write such a vital, changing document was obviously high.

From the rich information provided by the review of ethnographic studies of writing and the results of our own descriptive study, a number of implications emerge for writing instruction. The instructional practices suggested here can be adapted to all levels of students.

First, teachers should provide students with real, authentic writing experiences which "speak to" their social backgrounds, interests, and levels of expertise. Not only should writing be within their reach of handling, but it should grow from their interests, in and out of the classroom setting. If students feel that they have a stake in their writing and that their writing serves a function (more than completing the assignment), they will be more willing to work on it until the writing is truly finished and not merely abandoned. Thus, it is prudent for teachers to explore the role writing plays in students' lives, and work from that knowledge to create assignments that are important to students. The North Carolinia students in Shirley Brice Heath's ethnographic study rewrote booklets, manuals, how-to-books, warrantees, and the like to make written language real and accessible to others and to themselves. Other students might profit from writing activities that are central to their lives as well, be it letters of complaint, praise or inquiry; posters announcing musical or sports events; rules and regulations of their clubs or schools; or students' own rewriting of their textbooks to make them more current, interesting and real.

Second, student writing need not be restricted to one or two types of assignments; rather it should span a wide range of writing activities: from diaries and journals to letters and

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memos; from self-reflections and meditations to reports, interviews and evaluations; from poems and stories to plays and scripts; from expressive writing that is a subjective means of convincing an audience to writing that employs logic and argumentation as its means of support.

Such a range supports the notion that there are many different types of writing from which students can choose, and a host of occasions from which to write--a far cry from the cliche'd book report, comparison/contrast essay, and research paper! It is no wonder why high school and college students find writing a drudgery, given the often predictable and unimaginative assignments with which they are faced. When students of all ages are encouraged to choose a type of writing (sketches, plays, interviews, pamphlets, newspapers, flyers, editorials, etc.) to suit what they have to say, the frequently heard, "Oh it's just something I had to do for English" will turn into comments of interest and excitement. The end result might even be pieces of writing that are proudly shown to friends and family, and perhaps even used as reading materials for other classes.

Encouraging students to explore many different types of writing assignments also emphasizes the vital role that writing plays in people's lives; that is, writing is all around us, and showing students the variety of writing also shows them something of the importance of written discourse--a much needed and valuable lesson for students of all ages. A third implication, then, is that writing should be a natural, integrated part of classroom life--not something reserved for "language" or "English". Students should experience a variety of writing functions within the school context. As our data suggests, people engage in both self-directed writing and writing directed by authority. By providing students with opportunities to initiate self-directed writing in school, students can recognize its value and importance in their lives. Perhaps students could be encouraged to keep note pads on their desks which they can use to jot down notes to themselves, ideas for projects or reports, or personal reflections. It is interesting to note that one of the newer and popular computer word processing systems has in it just such a "note pad" on the "computer desk-top" making it possible for the user to jot down ideas, reminders, etc, as they come to mind while working on other documents. Students can also be encouraged to use writing as a means to communicate with others outside the classroom, such as writing to their favorite author, seeking information or resources from a

foreign consulate, and expressing thanks to a guest speaker or resource person. Writing needs to be a central component of the entire curriculum: it crosses all curriculum areas. Students will recognize that the functions of writing may differ given the content area--describing a science experiment, generating story problems in math for other students to solve, and synthesizing information for a social studies report would call on and sharpen a variety of different writing skills and abilities.

In addition to demonstrating the wide range of writing activities and functions that exist, a fourth implication deals with the variety of audiences for whom one writes. Students may take different approaches to their writing depending on the audience to whom the writing is addressed. For example, a letter of complaint written to a friend would be markedly different from a letter of complaint written to a parent or to a school administrator--different in tone, language, structure, etc. even if the message is the same in each of the three letters. Students can write for themselves and for their classmates; for their parents, siblings and other family members; for teachers and school administrators; for politicians, public officials and corporate heads; for people younger and older than themselves-- in essence, for people of all ages and stations in life. This helps to shatter the myth students often have that only teachers read their writing (and thus, the sole purpose of writing is for evaluation or for a grade). By showing them that there are others who read and benefit from their writing, we are supporting the idea that writing is to be read and/or heard, and that writing can affect others' lives.

As our data indicated, about one-third of our writing instances were considered steps in the writing process. The writer expected that the writing would be updated, changed or polished. A fifth implication, therefore, is the emphasis on process rather than product in writing instruction. The process of writing has been well documented by others, most notably by Britton (1975) and Graves (1983).

Finally, ethnographic studies of writing in and out of school can provide teachers with important insights into the nature and function of writing, and those insights can be used to create writing curricula which offer students real and accessible occasions for writing.

Perhaps Florio and Clark (1982) sum it up best when they write:

By means of study of classrooms as working social units with needs for communication, we can begin to illuminate...unanalyzed writing curricula. In so doing we can provide the tools and insights needed to take advantage of activities already occurring in...classrooms and to shape those activities to help children expand and extend their written expressive repertoires and their beliefs about writing and its power. (p.129)

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